# BLOCKADE BISALLOY: A REPORT FROM THE GONG

*The authors of this zine are communists from Wollongong, NSW, who have participated in Wollongong Friends of Palestine and helped to organise the pickets at Bisalloy.*

*The organising of these pickets, and the pickets themselves, take place on unceded Wadi Wadi, Dharawal, and Yuin lands.*

*We acknowledge that the first condition of emancipatory struggles in so-called australia is Aboriginal self-determination and that the struggle for a free Palestine is inextricably bound to decolonisation and land back. Always was always will be Aboriginal land.*

## Introduction

We arrived at 5:45am. It was an overcast morning in November, but unlike last time the sky was already light, dawn had just passed. We were in the middle of a regional industrial zone that was already alive with machinery churning, trucks arriving and departing, and workers from various sites smoking or drinking coffee at the gates to their jobs. As we walked down the road to the gates of Bisalloy Steels, where the picket would be, a friend struck up a conversation with some men on the street. They had heard about the picket happening down the road, but weren't too keen on discussing the basis of it: better things to do with their short time on smoko. In the distance we could see some comrades already gathered at the gates of Bisalloy.

It felt good to see numbers already growing at the gates. In the week leading up to the picket, we had received intel from workers and unions at Bisalloy, that the company was telling them they must cross the picket line. The night before we again had it confirmed that operations would be going ahead and workers were given the ultimatum by the bosses to cross the line, take leave, or go unpaid. So we had expected that there would be some conflict today, most likely with the police as they sought to break the picket line. We came prepared for this situation, with pallets and other materials to reinforce the barricades.

But as we arrived it was impossible not to notice how quiet it was. The usual industrial clammer of the steel treatment plant, the hiss and stamp of the machinery, was silent beyond the fence line. All doors were closed, signals that no work was underway were lit up, and no one was inside. Few police were scattered up and down the street. On the door to the office was a piece of paper saying "Closed for the day for annual company picnic".

What had happened? Were they really closed for the day once again? Had just the threat of another picket been enough for them to shut up shop?

In this article we want to reflect on the Palestine solidarity movement in Australia, with a specific focus on the efforts to disrupt production and supply chains at Bisalloy Steels, in the regional city of Wollongong. We hope to share some of the lessons we have learned while also analysing the strengths and limitations of the campaign at Bisalloy, and we hope it is of use as a documentation of movement and in contributing to going forward.

## Palestine Solidarity Movement in Australia: The Role of Pickets and Blockades

In Australia, as across the world, a massive wave of struggle rose against the Genocide in Palestine. This wave of movement was made up of a wide constellation of political groups and practices. Compared to previous iterations of Palestine solidarity in Australia, this wave has been more widespread, involving a range of forms of protest and action. These included regular rallies and marches across major cities, student encampments at several universities, an encampment at the Prime Minister's office, pickets and blockades of key infrastructure, and smaller scale actions involving lock-ons, targeted property damage and sabotage, among other practices.

We don't intend to draw out the strengths and limitations of each of these forms of activity, though we welcome the fact that the widespread character of this cycle of movement has allowed a range of political ideas, organisational practices, and tactics to be tested in practice and movement once again.

Instead, we want to comment on a particular sub-branch of activity, namely pickets, blockades, and disruption of key production and logistics sites that are part of the genocide supply lines, through a reflection on the pickets at Bisalloy Steels. Before turning to the Bisalloy experience, it is useful to sketch the uptake of pickets and blockades as part of the movement.

In the Australian context, pickets tend to be organised either as trade union pickets, or as community pickets. Trade union pickets are organised and run by a union involved in legal industrial action, during strikes or to challenge lock-outs. Due to the repressive legal context in Australia, the only legal pickets trade unions can organise are during a specific time of bargaining with the company, usually every 3-4 years.

Community pickets can occur to support workers in an industrial campaign where legal restrictions limit the actions of trade unions. In this case, community pickets are often endorsed by a trade union and are a tactic used to further a union campaign. But other types of community pickets are organised and run by the 'community', or in other words those participating in the picket themselves. It is only the later type of picket that has been used in the Palestine solidarity movement.

The first call for a blockade and community picket came in November 2023, targeting the Zionist shipping company ZIM. Simultaneous calls for port blockades in both Melbourne and Sydney were made to prevent the loading and unloading of various ZIM ships. Initially, the calls for pickets and blockades resulted only in protests in the vicinity of the port, without attempting to disrupt the shipping line at all. However, soon after pickets were attempted at each port.

At Port Botany, in Sydney, two community pickets were held at the port. While these pickets were not trade union pickets, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) supported and was involved in both. The MUA is the most militant and progressive union in Australia, and the Sydney branch can be considered the most left wing of the union. Their support for the picket bolstered confidence for the action. However, police broke both pickets and arrested dozens, including members of the MUA branch officialdom.

It is worth noting that in New South Wales, certain economic zones and infrastructure are designated "protected" and subject to stronger anti-protest laws. Incidents at these sites carry heavier fines and a higher likelihood of imprisonment. The ports in Sydney are subject to such special protection laws. While it was important that the laws were challenged through these pickets, and welcome that the MUA played a role in them, the number of arrests and the character of repression has meant that no further action has taken place at Port Botany since March, 2024.

In Melbourne, in the state of Victoria, the situation with Port actions has been different. The first picket there involved "actionists", MUA members, and others. The picket actions initially lasted a few days with MUA involvement in the picket and a refusal to work. However after 3 days, the union decided they were going back to work, a decision which split the remaining picket along factional as well as tactical lines. Some, primarily associated with Trade Unionists for Palestine, argued that the MUA decision to return to work meant that the picket must end. Others rejected this view, and persisted with the picket. While numbers shrank, the character of action became more direct and has continued since.

Since these early pickets in November 2023, a spread of pickets has occurred elsewhere, in Victoria, NSW, Queensland and elsewhere. The pickets organised at Bisalloy differ from the community pickets outlined above and give a different insight into how this tactic can work to disrupt supply lines.

## Who are Bisalloy Steels?

Bisalloy Steels is located in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, in the Wollongong suburb called Unanderra. It produces hardened, 'quenched and tempered' steel. This product has military and civilian applications; it can be used to make armoured vehicles and tanks, as well as gatehouses and watch towers, panic rooms, and jail/prison infrastructure.

The company purchases steel 'coil' from BlueScope Steel located in Port Kembla in the Illawarra and treats the coil using high heat and chemical reactivity. Bisalloy product is predominantly used in military vehicles such as Merkeva and Boxer-CRV tanks, and so-called civilian defence vehicles, such as retrofitted armoured cars produced by Plasan Reem. The absolute devastation wrought by Israel's Merkevas in Gaza and the West Bank does not need to be expounded. The use of civilian armoured cars, however, may not be initially apparent.

These vehicles are popular in illegal settlements across Palestine; as such, they facilitate the expansion of illegal settlements and allow settlers to move across the country with impunity. In the hands of brutal Israeli occupiers, armoured vehicles function as weapons themselves. They are used to harass and threaten journalists trying to document illegal settlers' activities.

Olive oil farmers often describe the first sign of settlers descending on the harvest as being the glint of sun on the heavily fortified armoured vehicles as they descend the high ridges where many settlements are located, and into the lower valleys where olive trees grow. The quenched and tempered steel covering the car's chassis allows for the mounting of launchers for tear gas canisters, ramming ancient olive trees, and for protecting the driver and passengers from incendiary devices settlers launched into fields to burn olive groves.

The company engages in two-way trade with Israel. For example, in 2023, Bisalloy contracted Plasan Reem to assist in the building of naval frigates for the Australian Navy. In addition to their existing provisions to the Zionist entity, Bisalloy's product guides increasingly hint at their product's possible application in incarceration technologies—cells, secure rooms, and watchtowers.

Under the banner of No Illawarra Steel for Genocide, Wollongong Friends of Palestine has organised a series of pickets at the site of Bisalloy Steels in Unanderra.

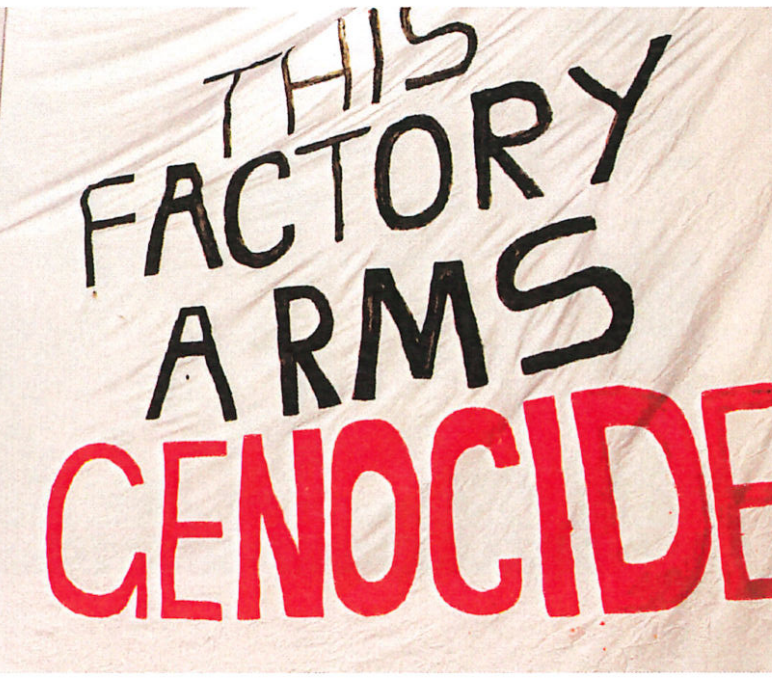
Plasan Re'em fit armoured steel chassis on a Toyota. Image: TWZ.com

## Organising Community Pickets

The wave of Palestine solidarity has seen the largest street mobilisations in so-called Australia since protests against Australian involvement in the War in Iraq. Like elsewhere, Wollongong had weekly pro-Palestine street protests, drawing several hundred people each week (a consistent number for a small regional city). The individuals, families and friends who connected weekly at rallies had previously organised a community Iftar, mass postering at a local politician's office, and an evening vigil. The rallies in turn became an open organising base for other actions, including the Bisalloy pickets.

Hosting open organising meetings after weekly rallies made these meetings broadly accessible to a wide array of local people interested in organising towards Palestinian liberation. The open format of the meetings allowed the cluster of people involved to develop an environment in which all participants felt able to contribute to discussion, debate tactics and objectives, and to disagree freely.

Embracing a practice of debate, which involved regular as well as irregular participants in the organising process, contributed to both propagating the idea that a picket and blockade of Bisalloy could be successful, while also building decision making infrastructure that became important on the picket lines. Mass, open organising of the pickets enabled mass, open organising at the pickets.



The meetings also allowed for a cross pollination of people and ideas where the possibility of undertaking the picket became more real for more people. Weekly protests drew a variety of people, many of whom had never been involved in political organising or direct action of any sort before. Rallies served as an entry point and the weekly open meetings built trust, while consistent conversations about directly disruptive tactics built courage and interest; and picket training and skill shares built capacity for mass, militant action.

The process of preparing for the pickets had to be consistent, slow and steady. At first, there was a sense from some that it would not be feasible to disrupt the production and circulation of materials at Bisalloy. Instead, this perspective argued that a protest at the front of Bisalloy would be more viable.

It took ongoing conversations– in cars, during protest marches, during meetings, during trainings, whilst we cooked iftar meals during Ramadan– to work through this perception and emerge with a collective sense of readiness for a little more risk taking. Though not everyone was ready to take the same risks at the same time, our collective arrived at a point where we felt that trying to fully shut down Bisalloy was possible, with each contributing what they felt they could.

Our approach to organising the pickets, aiming for a practice of mass action with an internal articulation of autonomy, sought to navigate beyond the apparent binary that seemed dominant in so-called Australia in the wake of Israel's 2023 invasion of Gaza. This binary tends to pose participation as either passive or limited to a closed group supported by observers. For example, while rallies can be important, they tend to involve a kind of passive participation for the majority of people present. Alternatively, closed affinity group actions carried out in isolation are capable of many impressive and important actions, but rarely foster a practice of widespread participation in militancy. Without dismissing the particular contributions the above modes offer, we hoped to develop a widespread participation in the picket, while also encouraging disruptive and militant action in doing so.

The approach to the pickets aimed to break down as much as possible the division between "organisers" and "the organised", or between organisers and participants. In so far as the struggle against capitalism cultivates the formation of collective bodies of class power which are in turn the vehicles of revolutionary action, we have sought to build the pickets as one such instance of this class power: the picket as an organ of struggle in its own right. In a shorthand, this has involved creating participatory political spaces including the pickets themselves, in which everyone present has the ability to contribute meaningfully to decisions, to contribute materially as they are able, and to use a variety of methods to shut down production and transport of steel to the Zionist Entity. We have aimed to promote mass action with an internal articulation of autonomy as a method of class movement away from simply observing actions planned and controlled by others, and to initiate mass action that we navigate collectively.

## On the Pickets

There have been 5 pickets and 3 other actions at Bisalloy since October 2023. There was an office occupation, which emerged from an open community meeting but was not publicly advertised in December 2023. In April 2024 a group entered the facilities and locked-on to machinery, which disrupted operations for several hours, and prompted the company to build an extra security fence. The pickets aimed to build off these actions, while also taking a different approach.

The first 2 pickets were limited in duration to 6-9am, seeking to interrupt the morning change of shift and prevent any materials entering or leaving the site (though each picket lasted longer than the proposed times). The third picket was called for 12 hours, 6am-6pm. And the last 2 pickets were open ended from 6am. Decisions about the length of each picket were made through discussion in our organising meetings, through reflections on the lessons of each previous picket.

Bisalloy is not a large industrial site, but it stretches a couple of hundred meters along an industrial road. There are two vehicle gates spaced about 150 meters apart, and an office entrance between them. It was necessary to have enough numbers to be able to block all entrances, and we also needed ways to communicate across the pickets. We prepared simple systems to communicate between each of the pickets, through communications delegates whose role was simply to share information to the common channel about needs and updates from each respective gate.

The picket at each gate functioned as its own hub for deciding how to run the picket at that gate. Within this wider system of communication and decision making, affinity groups could take decisions themselves on how to act.

Decisions during the pickets, to the extent they were necessary, were made collectively through picket meetings, both at individual gates, and across the whole picket. These decisions were made through discussion and, where possible, consensus. At the same time, there was no pretence to a binding character on everyone through these decisions.

Meetings allowed for clarity on what we knew about the site that day (for example, when we had been told in advance the site would be shut) or to gather observations from the whole picket (Were there cars in the carpark? Were the factory's roller doors open?). Picket meetings were also convened to discuss potential challenges to the picket from cops or others.

For example, when a cop tried to intimidate and move on a small group of the first picketers to arrive on site, we held a meeting on one of the site's driveways to decide how to respond. It was quickly proposed that we would begin our hard picket, with anyone reluctant to step onto the driveway remaining on the grass. Affinity groups quickly moved towards the driveways, and the picket continued on unchallenged.

The pickets have been successful, but it has been a strange success. At each picket hundreds of people have turned out to participate. During the first two shorter pickets, nothing moved in or out of the gates. When we called longer or indefinite pickets, the company shut operations completely for those days. While we prepared for confrontation with police and other hostilities, in practice on no occasion has the picket been challenged by police or anyone else. Each time, we assembled at each gate, blocking all entrances to the site-- and waited for a confrontation that never came. Aside from the one attempt described above to intimidate picketers into leaving the site, no threat has been made and production has been stopped on 5 occasions.

This is a strange phenomenon. In part it may be explained by the numbers of people turning up to the pickets. It may also reflect that while the workers employed at Bisalloy have not participated that they have played a role. We have sought to communicate and find ways to cooperate with workers at Bisalloy, we have also been in touch with the unions that have coverage at the site in the lead up to each picket, and we have been in touch with the South Coast Labour Council (regional peak body for trade unions) as well. Through the process of engagement with workers and unions we were able to learn some things about what to expect for the pickets and the sentiments of workers there.

For example, we were told on various occasions that there were sympathies for the pickets from workers, even though they were not themselves participating. We also had information shared with us prior to the picket in September, that the company had decided to close for the day under the threat of the picket. On a later occasion, we had been informed by workers and unions that the company was insisting they cross the picket line (though in the end the company closed for the day on this occasion too). It may be the case that sympathies within the shop and from the unions there for the pickets have played a role in shutting operations.

It is worth noting that the SCLC made the interesting step to initiate an audit into worker exposure to war crime prosecution due to working for industries implicated in the genocide. This opened the possibility, within the legal frameworks of industrial law, for workers to refuse to perform work that put them at risk of prosecution. Unfortunately, no worker/s has taken up this possibility.

Another factor is that the openly organised and public mobilisations for the pickets played a role in influencing the decisions of the company. The open publication of the call to shut down operations at bisalloy, for open defiance of the law, as well as open meetings in preparation, we think played a positive role not only in building confidence in the actions, but spooking the company.

Given the lack of threat posed to the pickets, on each occasion they ended up being much more like street parties, with the road overtaken by picketers, music, art, discussions, kids spaces, and Food Not Bombs all taking place. One outcome of the success of the pickets so far, is that a range of questions about how to maintain the pickets, and the political principle they have been based on while under direct pressure from the cops have not been tested.

## Picket as Tactic and the Question of Class Composition

A common criticism of community pickets is that they are weak, especially when compared to the workers employed at the picketed site taking industrial action themselves. For example, a recent article by the Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group argued that,
""The community" is also a poor substitute for working class organisation. Community blockades of manufacturing sites, ports and other infrastructure correctly identify the importance of disrupting production but they lack the power to achieve what they set out to do. A community blockade (unsupported by workers at the blockaded site) lasts as long as it takes the police to break it up."

While we do not disagree that workers at these manufacturing sites taking action would be very welcome, powerful, and an important step in class struggle, the fact of the matter is, aside from the MUA supported actions mentioned earlier (one of which was broken by police twice), not one single industrial action of that nature has taken place. In the current circumstances in Australia, the police don't even have to break up an industrial action, the character of industrial laws have already created the context in which such action does not occur, as unions typically will not take illegal industrial action. Certainly, we should try to counter this fact and contribute to organising and supporting such actions as best we can. But this critique seems short sighted to us and based on a simplification of what the forms and terrains of class struggle we can see in front of us actually are.

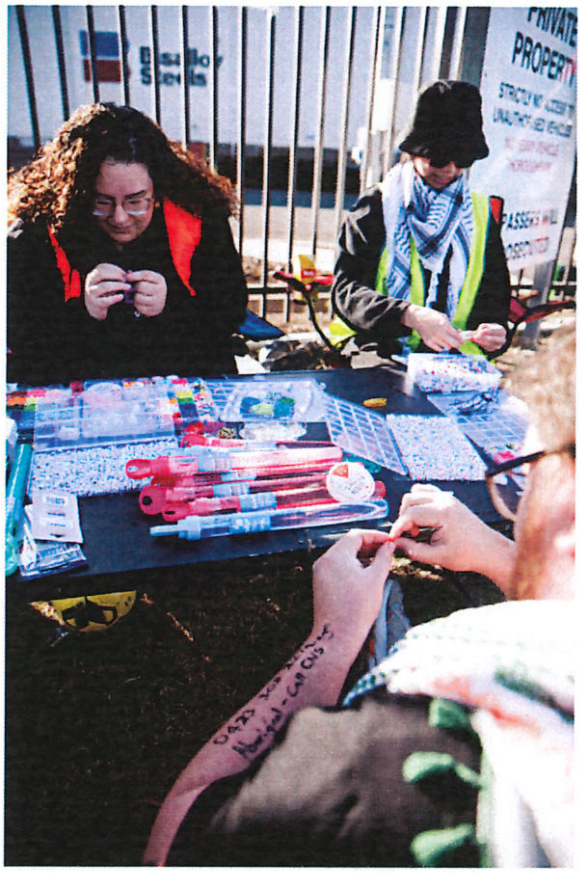
Moreover, the notion that community pickets do not themselves create a point of tension at which workers employed at the site might take action, is ill founded. To take the example of Bisalloy and the Illawarra, we can see how the community pickets have contributed to some, albeit not enough, movement at the level of the formal labour movement. We already mentioned above that there have been examples of communication, solidarity and sharing of information between the pickets and the workers inside. We can also point to how the SCLC initiated an audit into worker exposure to war crime prosecution. This step by the SCLC was partly in response to the ICJ ruling about the facts of genocide taking place, but also in response to the local context created by the pressure of the pickets. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, no union or rank and file worker stepped into the possibility of refusing to work on this basis.

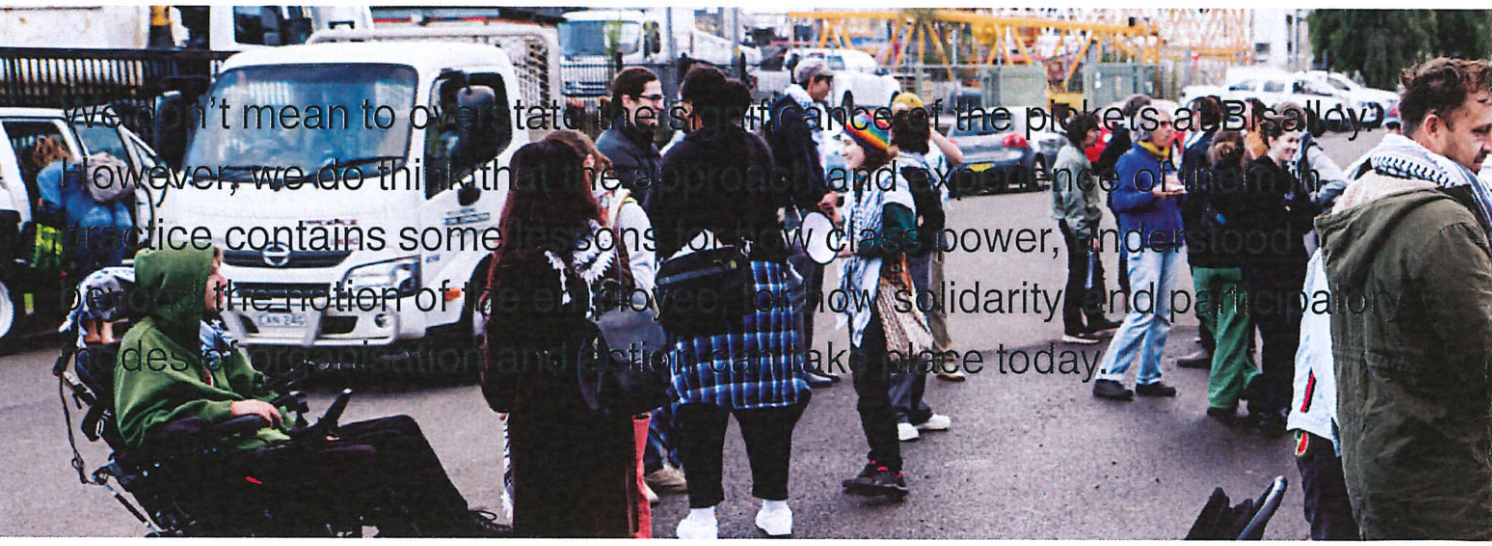
Given the lack of direct worker action in these sites, and the inability or unwillingness of the formal labour movement in this country to break out of the legal binds on formal industrial action, we would argue that community pickets do constitute a form of rebuilding class power reflective of the contemporary class composition of deindustrialised regions, where at present the shop floor modes of class power no longer hold what they once did.

It also seems to us that restricting the notion of class organisation and action to a given group of employees is problematic. To be brief, from a communist viewpoint, proletarian struggle involves the construction of organs of class power as well as the negation of our mutual condition of being variable capital and subject to the law of value. Such modes of class organisation are not limited to the shop floor.

Given that the proletarian condition exceeds the shop floor, and extends across the social factory, the critique of community pickets in that they may not involve the workers employed at a given site, risks a reductive notion of class power and organisation. Indeed we would argue that these types of pickets express a politics oriented to proletarian internationalism articulated against the social factory of capital – which in this case involves disrupting military supply lines as a concrete act of solidarity based on an assessment of the material circumstances in Wollongong which are bound to the atrocities in Gaza.

Given the above, we would argue that the pickets are themselves a form of class organisation, involving the class both inside and out of the company. In the context of the social factory, whereby the production, reproduction and circulation of capital draws into orbit all activities across these conditions, practices such as the picket that seek to negate the rule of the social factory assume a proletarian character. In light of this, the worker-affirmationist critique seems even less tenable.



We don't mean to overstate the significance of the pickets at Bisalloy. However, we do think that the approach and experience of them in practice contains some lessons for how class power, understood beyond the notion of the employee, for how solidarity and participatory modes of organisation and action can take place today.

## Epilogue

Once again, we gathered in the pre-dawn dark across the driveway at Bisalloy Steel. The police took their positions along the street. A hundred of us discussed the fact that, for the first time, we had no information at all about whether Bisalloy would be open or closed, whether our picket line was likely to be challenged. We agreed to take our positions across the three entrances to the site and wait.

Early signs were good. There were no cars in the worker car park, the enormous roller doors of the factory were completely closed, and there was not a single person moving around the site. A single hard hat sat on the picnic table where workers often take their lunch. We settled in. Discussion groups started at various gates across the picket; bands played at the entrance to the office. It was a picket, a protest, and a radical street festival, all in one.

During our second meeting of the day, around 8:30am, a picketer called Bisalloy's front office. With the picketer's phone on loudspeaker, the whole picket got quiet and leaned in. Closed for forty-eight hours, we were told, due to "the protestors". Later, we were told through the unions that workers were sent offsite for training. Our picket ended at 10:30am, and no workers entered the site for the rest of the day, or the next day either. Though there are things we can't know, it does appear our fifth picket achieved a forty-eight hour shut down of Bisalloy Steel.

Remember the victims of the Israeli genocide in